Legends and Lore of Coles County, Illinois

Ashmore Estates

Vol 1. Issue 4 June, 2006 www.michaelkleen.com

A poorly Photoshopped image.

The building looms large in the minds of many Coles County residents, even if they have only heard the stories. It has stood abandoned for nearly twenty years, and each year it deteriorates from vandalism and neglect. Its only neighbors have put their houses up for sale or rent. Every window has been shattered, and the walls are thoroughly covered with graffiti.

This is all that remains of what was once known as the Coles County Poor Farm (or Alms House), and then most recently, Ashmore Estates. It was built after the first poor farm was condemned by the Auxiliary Committee of the State Board of Charities, who felt so strongly that they remarked: "our pride and our humanity should make us determined to remove the disgrace of it from us." In January 1915, bids were asked for the construction of a new fireproof building on the location. (Fire had always been a problem at almshouses. According to local mortuary records, a 7-year-old girl named Elva L. Skinner burned to death inside the first building in February of 1880.) This first poor farm once housed between 30 and 40 people, among them a cousin of General Winfield Scott, the first over-all commander of the Union armies in the Civil War.

The building contract for the new almshouse was awarded to J.W. Montgomery in March of 1916 for $20,389, and the cornerstone was laid on May 17, 1916. According to the Charleston Daily Courier, the metal box in the cornerstone contained a Bible, a book of rules of the county board, the minutes of the supervisor's meeting that authorized the construction of a new almshouse, and current copies of three local newspapers.

The architect who designed the building was L.F.W. Stuebe, and it originally had two large, brick porches in the rear, which have since been destroyed.

The poor farm operated for over sixty years until attitudes regarding public welfare started to change, and the building failed to modernize. In May of 1979, the Illinois Department of Public Health ordered the building closed after finding twenty-two safety code violations, but it remained open until November after a Coles County judge found progress in fixing the violations.

In the early 1980s, the building reopened as Ashmore Estates, a home for the mentally and developmentally disabled. There were thirty-six residents there at one time, directed by Sharon Hood and Lynn Davis. The Times-Courier described it as a pleasant and caring environment where residents were happy, had their needs taken care of, and even pursued interests like music.

The southern façade in autumn (top) and summer (bottom)

© Black Oak Press, Illinois 2006

Ashmore Estates was closed down in 1987 when it was again condemned by the state for health code violations. Debris had piled up from renovations and never been removed, wiring was exposed, fire extinguishers were missing, and there was little in the terms of safety features. The wooden railings seen along the hallway walls were added as a last-ditch effort to keep the institution open, but it was too-little-too-late.

A few years later, Corrections Corporation of America wanted to buy the building for use as a mental health clinic for teenaged boys, but the Ashmore Village Board denied them a zoning variance. There was also public resistance to the idea. Local residents thought such a facility would devalue their property, as though an abandoned and derelict building wouldn't.

The former reception desk.

In the early morning hours of November 1, 1995, a fire destroyed the small storage building across the driveway from the main edifice. A collection of cinderblocks and a cement foundation are all that remains there today.

Unclear of the actual owner (A Champaign County resident named Paul Swinford had owned the building after it was closed, but he released the deed to a real estate broker), and facing possible condemnation, Ashmore Estates went up for sale at auction in the summer of 1998 because of delinquent taxes going back for two years. Arthur Colclasure, a Sullivan resident, bought the building for $12,500 and planned to turn it into his home. Evidently he became tired of replacing broken windows, because the building has continually deteriorated since that time. Its only resident has been the ghost stories taken out of it by curiosity seekers.

The Main Hallway. The railings on the walls were one of the last things to be added to the structure.

Ashmore Estates parallels the tragic history of healthcare for the poor and disabled in the United States. It has always been an industry troubled by neglect and the whims of science. Like its residents, the building itself has been relegated to the dustbin of history; a curiosity best kept at arms length from the community. Instead of preserving the building as an important historical landmark, if only for its stunning architecture, local residents are content to let it be taken over by vandals and reclaimed by nature.

No one knows how much longer the building will remain. Someday soon it might just be a distant memory.

© Black Oak Press, Illinois 2006